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ABSTRACT

A major lesson of the past decade's education reform measures and school improvement efforts is that educational change of almost any stripe is a problem of the smallest unit. It is a problem that turns on the incentives, attitudes, abilities, and responses of those ultimately responsible for seeing that initiatives for improvement translate into improved educational services for students. Teachers teaching in classrooms is what education is all about. Teachers teaching in classrooms determine the eventual result of reform policies; consequently, the spate of present policies that take direct aim at the competence of the teaching force must be assessed against the reality of the task. That reality encompasses the context within which teachers teach, the incentives to support professional growth and commitment to a teaching career, and the factors that affect a teacher's ability to respond to incentives, to develop professionally, and to aspire to excellence in classroom practice. This essay undertakes such an analysis by looking at the context, incentives, and constraints of teaching and then by examining some of the most popular teacher reform policies against this reality. A three-page bibliography concludes the document. (JD)

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THE LIMITS OF POLICIES TO PROMOTE TEACHING EXCELLENCE

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THE LIMITS OF POLICIES TO PROMOTE TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin

INTRODUCTION

Since 1983, renewed legislative interest in educational quality has produced more than 700 pieces of state legislation aimed at promoting excellence in teaching. These initiatives range from efforts designed to enhance the quality of the teaching force by tightening entry requirements, to policies intended to weed out incompetent teachers, to measures intended to increase the skills of present teachers, to initiatives that attempt to retain talented teachers through the provision of new incentives and rewards. A curious aspect of this avalanche of policy on teaching reform is that it by and large reflects the perceptions of individuals outside the classroom about the nature of the "excellence problem" and the promise of particular policy "solutions", rather than the views of classroom teachers.

A major lesson of the past decade's education reform measures and school improvement efforts is that educational change of almost any stripe is a problem of the smallest unit. It is a problem that turns on the incentives, attitudes, abilities and responses of those ultimately responsible for seeing that initiatives for improvement translate into improved educational services for students. Teachers teaching in classrooms is what education is all about. Teachers teaching in classrooms determine the eventual result of reform policies. Consequently, the promise or the limits of any educational reform policy, but most especially the spate of present policies that take direct aim at the competence of the teaching force, must be assessed against the reality of the task. That reality encompasses the context within which teachers teach, the incentives to support professional growth and commitment to a teaching career, and the factors that affect a teacher's ability to respond to

incentives, to develop professionally and to aspire to excellence in classroom practice. This essay undertakes such an analysis by looking at the context, incentives and constraints of teaching and then by examining some of the most popular teacher reform policies against this reality.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF TEACHING

Experts disagree on the status of teaching. Is it an art? Is it craft? Is it labor? Is it a profession? A semi-profession? Regardless of the categories or terminology used to describe teaching, there is broad agreement on fundamental attributes of the teaching activity and the institutional context in which it occurs. These attributes are critical to policy discussions about strategies to improve classroom instruction and to promote teacher quality because they set fundamental conditions within which and through which such policies must operate.

The Realities of Educational Practice Everyday classroom practices mirror the variability that marks local responses to reform policies and that frames the policy problem. Variability in classroom practices has many roots. Chief among them is the organizational context in which teachers work. Schools are only loosely related to one another and to central offices (Weick, 1982) Consequently, at the district level, there is no consistent relationship among units within the school system, line authority is limited, and practice is segmented. Thus, despite the bureaucratic structure of school districts, education practitioners generally are not subject to hierarchical control in their work and uniformity in practice cannot be commanded.

Structure at the school level is analogous. The isolation of the classroom teacher and the cellular organization that characterizes practice have received much comment. (Lightfoot, 1983; Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1975; Boyer, 1983; Fullan, 1982; McPherson, 1972). Teachers have little

opportunity to observe their peers, to compare classroom practices, or to support each others' efforts. Indeed, time spent with colleagues often is perceived as "stolen" (McPherson, 1972:51). Further the powerful norm of "non-interference" associated with conventions of teacher autonomy makes frank discussions about classroom practices difficult. Both the organization of the teaching task and the norms of the profession inhibit the organizational control and communication that could bring a measure of consistency to teacher practices or the collegial support so important to professional growth (Little, 1981.)

The nature of teaching also supports variability in practice. Teaching is particular because, unlike many other areas of professional or semi-professional activity, there are few agreed-upon or well developed techniques, strategies or unambiguous directions for successful educational practice (Lortie, 1969; Lortie, 1975; Sarason, 1982). While broad guidelines suggest the components of effective teaching (see Good, 1983, for example), at root effective teaching is a problem-solving activity that relies on the judgment and discretion of teachers in developing a situationally effective response. Student socio-economic status, school context, pupil abilities, and previous instructional exposures are but a few of the many factors that influence teacher effectiveness for any given student or class (Cronbach, 1975; McKenna, 1981).

Teachers also differ in the practices that work for them and the problems they confront in their particular classrooms (Armor, et al., 1977; Good, 1981 and 1983). No single specific instructional program works for all teachers or all students; effectiveness depends centrally on the classroom context and a teacher's judgment about how to respond to it (Centra and Potter, 1980). Variability, then, can be a policy problem because it can signal unacceptably uneven quality in classroom practice. But it is a policy opportunity because

it is not only inevitable in the specifics of classroom practice, it is a key ingredient of effective performance.

It is precisely the pragmatic nature of the teaching task that makes isolation among the greatest impediments to learning to teach, to improving teaching skills, and to enhancing diagnostic ability. These ingredients of educational excellence cannot be packaged or programmed. They reside in the accumulated wisdom of practicing teachers. Thus the obstacles to collegial interaction and support comprise probably the greatest single impediment to professional growth and development.

The relatively flat structure of the teaching career also distinguishes it from other professional or semi-professional activities. Classroom teachers can move up rungs on the district's tenure ladder, but there are few positions outside the classrooms for teachers to move up into and still retain a primary focus on classroom instruction. In most districts, career advancement for teachers means an administrative position. These positions are limited in number and appeal. Not all classroom teachers aspire to an administrative post since instruction, not administration, was their primary interest.

There are two important consequences of this flat career structure for teachers. First, there are few of the salary differentials or differences in occupational status that signal "success" in other professions. Thus teachers have few of the outward signs of having done well in their chosen career. After ten years of service, there is little in pay or position to distinguish the successful teacher from the mediocre or even from the ineffective colleague. Second, the flat career structure for teachers builds a sameness into their activities; this lack of variety can be intellectually and emotionally numbing for most teachers.

In addition, teaching in America also is a relatively low status, poorly

paid occupation. A 1984 Harris survey reported that a majority of teachers polled felt beleaguered by lack of respect and an inability to "earn a decent salary". Indeed, American teachers' salaries are on the bottom level of jobs requiring a college degree.

Finally, an essential lack of control characterizes teaching in most public schools. For all the talk about "teacher autonomy" and the inability of policy (or administrators) to affect what transpires "behind the classroom door," central aspects of teaching are in fact beyond the control of the classroom teacher. In most public schools, teachers have no ability to say who will occupy their classroom seats and limited ability to control what occupies student attention or indeed their own time and attention. For example, except for teachers in special classroom situations, teachers cannot select or dismiss pupils from the classroom. While this principle of open access lies at the heart of public education in a democracy, it also means that the match between a teacher and pupils will vary (in many instances randomly) and that teachers will be required to do the best they can with youngsters who have little interest in school generally or who do not fit with their particular approach or strengths. Or, the range in ability levels with which a teacher must deal often precludes instructional excellence. The problems of preparation and instruction are staggering when for example a teacher has back-to-back social studies classes, with students ranging in reading ability from third to ninth grade in one class and performing at college level in another.(see Daly,1984)

In addition, teachers in many public schools are limited in their ability to dismiss unruly students from the classroom. Administrators often have neither the time nor the facilities to attend to student discipline problems that are less than severe; parents frequently are unsupportive of efforts to maintain classroom discipline. Against this reality, it is not surprising that

the June 1984 Harris Poll of American teachers found that students' lack of interest in their classes, overcrowded classes and lack of discipline ranked among the most serious problems in the schools.

Beyond the motivation, interest and ability of their students, teachers' control over classrooms activities also is seriously compromised in many respects. Many factors outside the teachers' perview shape the focus, content and cadence of classroom activities: state, federal or local mandates about classroom activities such as metric education, mainstreaming for handicapped youngsters, or testing schedules; extracurricular affairs such as cheerleading practice, public address announcements, or dental appointments; state or local policies concerning textbook selection, district curriculum policies. For example, the level of school building "noise" quite beyond the insensitive disruptions of the PA system is considerable:

> [Your plans come to little because you learn that] the sixth period class on Friday is going to be shifted to Monday because there's a pep rally ...which you have nothing to say about. Then... the fourth period of Tuesday, there's an assembly which you also had nothing to say about, on career planning, cross-country skiing, flamingo dancing, alcoholism, you name it. Then, of course, there's a big surprise in wait for you because on the third period on Thursday when you've really planned a crackerjack lesson...nobody told you that eight students in that class are in the band and are off to the state tournament. (Daly,1984:47)

These, then, are the realities of classroom practice. The frame the conditions of teaching as well as the incentives that influence the willingness of teachers to change.

Teacher Willingness to Change. The motivation of teachers is an important factor underlying the present condition of education and defining likely teachers' response to policy initiatives. Some analysts diagnose the disappointing outcomes of school improvement efforts in terms of "teacher resistance." This view generally frames teacher resistance in terms of disinterest in new ideas and unwillingness to consider change. At its most

critical, this explanation portrays teachers as lazy, unprofessional and passive; it interprets teacher unwillingness to change as personal inertia. This analysis reflects the frustration of reformers hoping to stimulate new and better practices through policy; it demonstrates the ineffectiveness of a command-and-control model of educational reform. And it misrepresents the reasons underlying teacher unwillingness to embrace an educational reform initiative. Contrary to these cynical analyses, teachers' responses to proposals for change most often are deeply rooted in the nature of their work and in the professional norms, standards, and concerns that guide practice and support professional learning.

For teachers, motivation to learn--willingness to engage in professional development activities associated with a school improvement effort--turns on three particular considerations. The first is tied to the primary source of teacher satisfaction and reward--service to youngsters or transmitting knowledge associated with a particular discipline (Lortie, 1969; Lortie, 1975; McPherson, 1972). Because teachers' sense of satisfaction and efficacy is grounded in student accomplishment , their willingness to engage in learning about new practices depends above all on their assessment of the consequence of a proposed change for students. Is it appropriate to student needs? Does the practice appear promising for this group of students? The weakness of extrinsic incentives, particularly money, as strategies for motivating teachers to change has been documented repeatedly in research on planned change efforts. For example, a study of urban staff development underscores the importance of the intrinsic rewards and motivation tied to student performance (Moore and Hyde, 1981). Researchers found that extra pay did not act as an effective strategy for encouraging teachers even to attend staff development activities. Teachers, they saw, participated meaningfully only

where benefits to students were clear. Studies of learning in adults underscores this conclusion. Researchers found that external demands are largely ineffective in stimulating new learning in adults; internal incentives are key to adult learning (Brundage, 1980; Knowles, 1978).

Teachers not only must see a proposed change as relevant to their classrooms, they also must have a measure of confidence about its consequences for their students. Uncertainty about the effects of a new practice for their students in their classrooms comprises a fundamental obstacle to teacher willingness to carry out a new practice. This is not surprising given that significant and recurrent doubt about the worth of their work with students is a general and consistent teacher characteristic (Ashton, Webb and Doda, n.d.; Lortie, 1975; Jackson, 1968). Thus regardless of the level of present student performance, teachers' acceptance of a new practice by teachers is predicated on the belief that students will learn no less and predictably more as the result of new practice. This confidence is not generated by abstract assurances from academics or program developers; it is not generated by reformers' exhortations about the need for change; it is not assured by testimonials from practitioners in distant sites; it most certainly does not follow mandate. It is generated by concrete demonstration of the site and classroom specific merits of a new practice.

The necessity for teachers to feel confident about the implication of a new practice for their classrooms is one way to interpret the importance of teachers' sense of ownership, a factor consistently associated with successful planned change efforts (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978; Crandall and Loucks, 1983). Similarly, after looking at the response of teachers to reform policies initiated over the past 100 years, Cuban (1984) concludes "...teacher commitment and involvement seldom responds to mandates or coercive threats beyond brittle compliance. Where classroom change occurred...teachers seem to

have been active collaborators in the process." (p. 265)

Even where teachers are convinced of the promise and appropriateness of a new strategy for their students, their willingness to try it is affected by a second factor-- their assessments of their ability to perform competently and the concomitant degree of psychological and professional safety associated with the change effort. Teachers, like others, recognize that substantial change almost inevitably involves a period of chaos and uncertainty (Lewin, 1947; Schein, 1972). The acquisition of new skills and attitudes requires that teachers let go of former routines and beliefs--a process Lewin calls "unfreezing". Quite understandably, teachers have a number of crucial questions about this process. How will they be evaluated during this uncertain period? What kind of collegial or technical support will be available to assist in the transition? How will they know how well they and their students are doing during the implementation process? Can they do it?

Edgar Schein (1972), an analyst of professional development and barriers to individual change, points out that"...no matter how much pressure is put on a person or a social system to change through disconfirmation [of present practice] and the induction of guilt-anxiety, no change will occur unless members of the system feel it is safe to give up the old responses and learn something new." (pp.76-77) Teacher concerns about the psychological and professional safety of modifying existing practice, then, can transcend even enthusiastic assessment of the promise of a reform effort.

Finally, even when substantive and psychological concerns have been addressed, willingness to change may be depressed for yet a third reason--what Doyle and Ponder (1977-1978) call the "practicality ethic." Teachers may decline to participate because it does not appear professionally practicable. Is the program a priority for district administrators? Will the time and

effort necessary to implement a new project be rewarded professionally through recognition, appreciation or even acknowledgment? Does the program address what teachers perceive as a priority need for students--or is it nice but not necessary, or relevant only to mid-range classroom concerns?

Costs constitute another set of practical questions teachers usually explore before responding to a reform policy. Is the full range of personal, material and professional levies clear? Do the consequences of failure or implementation costs outweigh even optimistic assessments of benefit? Uncertain or negative answers can be off putting even where teachers agree about the value or a proposed change and feel comfortable about carrying it out.

Experience has shown that, unless teachers are committed to a reform effort, desultory compliance or complete disregard is the likely result. Their response to educational reforms policies highlights the inevitable conflict for professionals in a bureaucracy and teachers' loyalty to the institution and its requests (Scott, 1966). The ostensible resistance of teachers to change is rooted in educators' incentives and reward systems. It reflects the norms, standards and behaviors central to professionalism. Ironically, it is often professional concern about a wide range of goals and multiple forms of rationality rather than personal apathy that depresses the teacher's willingness to change.

Teacher Ability to Implement Educational Change. The willingness of teachers to change, and their responses to the array of new teacher-oriented policies, also are conditioned by their ability to do so. A number of quite different factors affect a teacher's ability to act on new knowledge, promising practices, or external mandates. Most fundamentally, in order for teachers to carry out a new educational practice effectively, they must learn, to varying degrees, new skills and acquire new attitudes or values. Some

educational reform policies turn primarily on the acquisition of new knowledge, such as adding career education to the social studies curriculum. But most educational reform efforts intend change of a more fundamental sort. In addition to new skills they assume change in the values and attitudes that shape practice. Some of the necessary attitudinal change is rooted in tradition. As Cuban(1984) elaborates, teachers teach as they were taught (see also, Nemser, 1983). Replacing practice, then, involves modifying deeply held views about "best practice" and relinquishing long-term beliefs about instruction. This departure from traditional practice is both upsetting and threatening. In order for the learning necessary to change of this stripe to occur, teachers need continuing support for their activities, a voice in the pace and focus of the efforts, and professional development activities adequate to the task.

One important aspect of the support necessary for teachers to learn new skills is credible and easily accessible technical assistance. Rand researchers found that successful change efforts usually enjoyed local technical support that could respond to the teachers' (generally unscheduled) calls for advice and could easily translate their recommendations into the concrete terms of a particular classroom. Outside consultants who appeared on a prescheduled basis to address prescheduled topics were not nearly as effective. In some cases they actually depressed project outcomes (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978). Crandall and Loucks reported similar findings for the NETWORK's study of a different population of development initiatives. They found that new practices "live or die" by the amount of personal assistance they receive and that effective assistance is "user-oriented" rather than "innovation-oriented." "Its effects-- such as reassurance, support, expansion of users' repertoires, problem solving and increased

interdependence--help users master the practice..."(Crandall and Loucks, 1984: 11)

Teachers also need but lack time. Time beyond an isolated workshop or staff development session is essential to mastery of new practice. Collegial interaction takes time. Review of present activities in light of new requirements and percepts takes time. Practicing takes time. Working on materials and developing conceptual understanding takes time. The importance of adequate time is compounded in an educational reform effort when daily routines are complicated by the demands of changing existing practice. Beyond time to learn, teachers need time to apply a new practice or idea. What good, for example, is an intensive training program in promising strategies to improve students' writing if teachers have no time to review and critique student writing products?

Similarly, the ability of teachers to carry out new methods also turns on the extent to which simultaneous demands and competing priorities allow teachers to focus on new activities or attend to policy objectives (Lipsky, 1980). The requirements and requests associated with an educational reform effort typically are but one of many that contend for teachers' attention. Students, principals, parents, district administrators, supervisors as well as multiple and external mandates for change all vie for notice. Reform policies multiply the complexity of the teacher's job by adding more responsibilities and requirements. Reform policies also swell the centers of authority and oversight responsible for classroom activities and increase the centers of categorical activities that impinge on practice (Scott, 1984). Teachers, like other street level bureaucrats, base their priorities and strategies for reconciling competing demands in the highly particularistic terms of their classrooms and norms of practice (Lipsky, 1982; McPherson, 1982). A teacher's decision to ignore or shortcut a reform policy, then, may reflect an

assessment of their students' best interests rather than footdragging or base resistance to change. It is important that the result of these competing priorities is more than just uneven attention to the myriad requests made of teachers. Overloading classroom teachers with requests and objectives also necessarily diminishes the quality of classroom instruction. Even when responses to external policies, requests and mandates are largely ceremonial, there are practical consequences for the teacher and for the classroom because of activities foregone, energy spent, practices attenuated, and attention diffused.

* * *

These then are the institutional, occupational, and practical realities of the classroom teacher: isolation, a pragmatic technology, commitment to service, illusive rewards, low status and financial compensation, limited autonomy, competing demands, time pressures, and unvarying activity. These are the realities that generate the policy problems associated with the present condition of American education and through which policy solutions must work.

THE POLICY SOLUTIONS

Despite variations in the specific strategies identified to carry out legislative intent, the conceptions of the "policy problem" and the broad solutions applied to the problem by legislatures around the country are remarkably similar. The policy problem appears to be three-fold: (1) teachers with inadequate skills remain in the profession; (2) adequate teachers are not given the support or incentives to become excellent or achieve their potential as teachers; and (3) excellent teachers find insufficient stimulation or reward to induce them to remain in the profession.

Among the most popular policy solutions applied to the teacher quality

problem are:

- o salary increases
- o merit pay
- o proficiency tests
- o mentor teachers
- o career ladders
- o teacher evaluation

What does the reality of teaching suggest as the promise and the limits of each?

Salary Increases and Merit Pay. As the June 1984 Harris poll affirms, low pay is a factor that troubles most teachers. And it is true that talented teachers leave the profession because they feel that a teaching career cannot support them or their families in a comfortable or an appropriate fashion. However, as the preceding analysis suggests, low pay is not the primary reason for teachers to leave the profession (although it is an important factor dampening the interest of students considering a teaching career). Teachers leave teaching primarily because of doubt about their effectiveness or their inability to grow professionally.(Rosenholtz, 1984.) Teacher attrition is highest in inner city schools serving poor minority populations where student progress is slow, discipline problems high, administrative and other support lacking and perceived opportunities for professional growth limited. Their salaries, however, are comparable with those of colleagues teaching in the suburbs. While it is true that base pay should be raised to the point that teaching can compete with other professions for the academically able, service-oriented college graduates, it also is clear that simply meeting minimal salary requirements is unlikely to promote the retention of talented teachers.

Merit pay concepts hold little more promise as a strategy to improve

teaching. Indeed, the ostensible "merit" of merit pay plans--rewarding distinguished teaching and distinguishing among levels of competence with a school system--contains the source of the plan's likely failure. Current merit pay strategies appear seriously counterproductive when viewed against the norms and beliefs that shape the teaching profession. For example, research consistently shows that monetary incentives by themselves do not motivate teachers to improve. Further, we have seen that monetary rewards can actually depress teacher willingness to change because provision of extra money for school improvement efforts removes the spirit of "voluntarism" necessary to successful change and the sense of responsibility for a course of action that accompanies volitional commitment (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978; Deci, 1976; Pfeffer, 1981).

Schemes for merit pay as considered in most states also are problematic because they function in a closed fiscal system. Unlike universities where academic promotions are predicated on ability and accomplishment, not resource availability, school systems generally will require quotas to determine "merit" within the teaching force. Further, it is not at all clear how merit can be assessed within the K-12 system. Whereas university professors are judged by their peers on their professional contributions, no such agreed upon strategy for determining merit exists in the elementary or secondary schools. Not only are measurement problems staggering, there is little agreement on the important components of merit and valid indicators of them. Thus, the inevitable consequences of merit pay as presently proposed will be that meritorious teaching will go unrewarded because of insufficient resources or measurement problems and that competition for these scarce resources will provoke competition that undermines the collegial relations essential to high quality teaching.

Merit pay schemes, like salary increases, have another extraordinary aspect. They seem to assume that teachers can chose to improve their teaching or to withhold competent practice. Or, put more crudely, policies grounded only in financial reward assume that teachers have been holding out on their students and that more money will motivate them to apply this skill and expertise. Yet, as we saw, teachers frame rewards primarily in terms of students' accomplishments. Major impediments to effective teaching lie not in lack of teachers' desire to do their best, but in their ability to do so.

Proficiency Tests. Tests of the proficiency of teachers have proliferated throughout the states, especially in those with little prior educational reform legislation. In most states, these tests largely are tests of verbal ability and numeracy. Except insofar as they act as a gross tripwire, identifying teachers whose absence of fundamental literacy or academic competence makes them poor classroom instructors, it is difficult to see the value of these tests as measures to improve teachers primarily because, beyond this level of minimal competence, it is difficult to see what the competencies that are measured on these tests have to do with excellence in teaching. Teaching, as we have seen, is an activity with few agreed upon technologies and in which excellence is highly situational and context bound. The pragmatic and problem solving skills required by excellent teachers--and even by simply competent teaching--are beyond the purview of these standardized instruments. Proficiency tests are not testing the things that matter most in teaching.

Widespread use of teacher proficiency tests to recertify experienced teachers raises another important problem. Sweeping legislation aimed at bad apples inevitably frustrates and insults the good guys (Bardach and Kagan, 1982: 343ff). Requirements that all teachers, despite experience or acknowledged expertise, submit to such blunt and questionably relevant

screening instruments can only contribute to further erosion of the teacher's sense of status and incur the resentment of those whose cooperation is essential to the prospects of educational reform.

Mentor Teachers. Mentor teaching schemes, which identify talented teachers to serve as mentors for their colleagues, have been ratified in several states. As a policy approach, it is promising for two central reasons: (1) it offers career alternatives for teachers who want to acquire new responsibilities yet continue to focus on classroom instruction; and (2) it provides mechanisms to breach the professional isolation of the teacher. Mentor teachers can provide collegial feedback and pass along the practical knowledge that is essential to learning to teach but seldom available to beginning teachers. Mentor teachers offer a way to draw on the human capital in the school system, to reduce the trial-and-error nature of learning to teach, and to provide the collegial support and feedback absent from most teachers' experience.

There are nevertheless serious problems associated with mentor teacher strategies--problems sufficient to undermine their apparent strengths. Most importantly, role ambiguity for the mentor teacher can frustrate "mentoring" attempts. Is the mentor a classroom teacher on leave? If so, professional norms of "non-interference" predictably will impede mentor efforts to observe and offer assistance based on teacher's performance Is the mentor a teacher on-special assignment who continue to have part-time classroom responsibilities? If so, it is predictable that mentoring will be consistently slighted as the mentor teacher's commitment and attention gravitate toward the classroom, where primary professional commitments and obligations reside. Is there a quota on mentor teachers for the district? If so, teachers who qualify but fail to be selected predictably will be

demoralized. Is the mentor position a rotating one? If so, problems in morale and role perception can be expected as the mentor teacher return to the classroom, giving up higher status, salary and other benefits.

How are mentor teachers selected? If administrators designate mentor teachers, the credibility and utility of mentors will be undermined if teachers selected are seen as meritorious because they are good district citizens rather than innovative educators. Is a teacher evaluation system used to select mentors? If so, is it fair?

On the face of it then, a mentor teacher strategy has the potential to address issues central to the problem of enhancing the quality of the teachers' classroom practice--namely, isolation, lack of relevant, credible feedback about performance, differentiated career possibilities, and sharing of professional experience. Yet, as most current mentor teacher schemes are structured, it appears that the normative issues and the real or apparent professional conflicts will mitigate their effectiveness.

Career Ladders. In some states, career ladders simply are fancy dress for merit pay. There is little of substantive consequence as a teacher moves up the ladder; they hold little promise as a strategy to improve teaching. Where career ladders offer genuine options for teachers and support differentiation within the teaching role, they address the problem of teacher quality in multiple ways: by removing the flatness from the occupational structure; by creating new roles and responsibilities to which teachers can aspire; creating a differential reward structure tied to responsibility and competence; and by building institutional capacity to support beginning teachers as some teachers assume a master teacher role. Career ladders thus incorporate features of other reforms, particularly the strengthened tie between performance and pay seen in merit pay schemes and the peer-based assistance and support central to mentor teacher plans. In addition, career

ladders attempt to make teaching more like other professions, medicine and law, for example, in which stages of a career are clearly defined, gatekeeping functions are known, and increased tenure means significantly increased responsibility, status and financial reward.

But, as presently constructed in most states, many of the problems associated with other policies aimed at improving the quality of classroom instruction also appear in career ladder initiatives. There are obvious problems where quotas and competition are associated with movement up the career ladder. The issues of determining merit in merit pay scheme also are germane to determining teacher promotion up the career ladder.

Career ladder proposals also raise special problems. For example, the time sequence specified for promotion through the ladder in many states is likely to cause problems, especially with talented teachers. For these teachers, the six years specified between steps may only cause frustration. Frustration also is a possible consequence of the generally hierarchical nature of most career ladders. "Up" is assumed to mean increased responsibility and authority, either as a master teacher or in an administrative function. What about the career interests of those teachers who do not want increased responsibilities but rather increased status as a classroom teacher? Most career ladders define an insufficiently diverse system of rewards. Further, many career ladder systems, ironically, could represent a net loss in the quality of classroom practices because they would pull the best teachers out of the classroom and do little to improve the capacity of those who remain.

Teacher Evaluation. To a greater or lesser extent, all reform policies depend on the existence of reliable, functioning teacher evaluation system. Merit pay schemes, mentor teacher plans, career ladders all assume ability to

assess teacher performance and to differentiate among teacher competencies. However, there presently are few strategies or procedure adequate to support these evaluation-based reforms. Most current teacher evaluation systems consist of standard checklists and are based on limited observation of teacher performance. These measures are bound not only to be misleading and irrelevant if not often actually wrong. Because teaching is characterized by a weak technology in which effectiveness is defined situationally, such tightly bureaucratic or rationalized approaches misspecify both the process of teaching and indicators of effective practice. Yet, a highly specified accountability approach is predictable as legislators move to increase their influence over education outcomes. For example, Meyer and Rowan (1977) observe that organizations lacking a well-defined technology will import institutionalized rules and procedures. So, too, will policymakers probably try to construct strategies of control over what appears to be an undisciplined education system. But, almost by definition, they will not be controlling the things that matter to the quality of classroom practice.

Present teacher evaluation schemes also suffer from the fact that few administrators have the skills necessary to observe classroom performance. Instead, assessments by principals are typically based in an " I know what I like" school of evaluation. Consequently, evaluations reflect principals' taste, preferences and observational skill rather than a consistent set of criteria to inform either accountability or improvement.

In most districts around the country, in short, teacher evaluation is a desultory ritual that contributes much to teacher anxiety and administrator burden but little to accountability or improvement. Nonetheless there is evidence that a teacher evaluation system based in a strong program of administrator training in observation or other strategies to bring informed judgment to classroom observation can be a powerful school improvement

strategy (McLaughlin, 1984; Stiggins and Bridgeford, 1984).

Credible, specific feedback on their performance provides the information teachers need to reflect on their practice and assess their own competence. Such information about classroom performance provides powerful motivation for professional development because it is concrete and suggests direction for improvement. (Contrast the typical "Keep up the good work!" or "Needs improvement in classroom discipline.") Information of this kind also is the source of the rewards most meaningful to teachers--their effectiveness with their students.

The power of teacher evaluation has other roots. It provides a way for principals to promote the common goals associated with effective schools, to identify instructional practices worthy of sharing among colleagues, and to breach teachers' professional isolation through informed feedback on their performance. Teacher evaluation of this stripe also can improve classroom practice because it supports the "counselling out" of teachers ill-suited to teaching. In the face of detailed, concrete information that points to performance, despite adequate remediation opportunities, most teachers are amenable to suggestions that they seek another vocation. (Wise, et al., 1984)

Despite its significant promise, teacher evaluation is an instance in which policy objectives and expectations have outdistanced available practice and technology. The strategies for implementing teacher evaluation as assumed by most state policies generally do not exist. Policies that mandate current teacher evaluation practices will accomplish little and risk undermining efforts to establish the trust and cooperation essential to improvement efforts.

THE LIMITS OF POLICIES TO PROMOTE TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Individually, all of the policies reviewed here have merit.

Unquestionably, teachers need and deserve more pay. There is no question that competence needs to be recognized within the profession and incompetence successfully managed; teachers themselves demand this. It is also true that career ladder initiatives respond to the fact that teaching has become a numbing, dulling activity because the relatively flat career structure prescribes the same activities day after day for the duration of a teacher's career. And, as we have seen, serious problems attend each of these popular solutions to the problem of teacher quality. While these problems present difficult policy issues, however, they are basically fixable. None of the policies reviewed here have what could be called fatal flaws. The problems are of specification, calibration and tuning.

Even if the problems evident in each of these reform initiatives were remedied, however, it is doubtful that they could promote significant improvement in the quality of educational practice. Singly and together, these reform efforts generally fail to address the incentives necessary to professional growth and neglect altogether the institutional context in which improved practices are supposed to occur. With the exception of clinically based teacher evaluation systems which provide believable, concrete feedback on teacher performance, and the most substantive of the career ladder proposals, these reform efforts generally do not address the factor most important to the norms and motivation of teachers--effective service to students--or major impediments to educational excellence--conditions in the workplace.

Proposed solutions represent only partial responses to complex systemic, institutional problems. These solutions fail to address the majority of impediments to excellence identified by teachers; they also ignore the systemic nature of the educational quality problem. It is not just money. It is not just lack of differentiated career opportunities. It is not just absence of feedback on performance. It is not just inadequate consultation and

assistance that stand in the way of better teaching. It is all of these things. It is administrator competence and skills. It is the fragmentation of teachers' activities into a myriad of tracts, ability levels, curricular, extra curricular and community responsibilities. It is the lack of support for instructional development. It is the lack of time for reflection. Yet reform policies generally are silent on issues associated with the school as a workplace--collegial support, time, technical assistance, administrative support.

Rather than optimism, the current array of policy solutions are cause for concern. Instead of the improvements policymakers hope will result, a more predictable consequence will be disappointment and criticism of educators as the press and the polity assess the consequence of their investment in reforming public education. A close look at the institutional reality of teaching shows current policy reforms to be fundamentally inadequate treatments because they miss factors central to the motivation, development, support and performance of our teaching corps. The measures needed to accomplish goals of increased excellence in teaching are institutional reforms that make substantial change in the teaching workplace -- comprehensive changes that are rooted in the functioning of the school system. They must identify, for example, ways in which the daily work of teaching be made more satisfying, challenging and stimulating . They must propose ways in which colleagues become mutually engaged in the identification and support of effective practice and provide the time for them to do so.

The reform policies currently being discussed and ratified represent an insufficient departure from the status quo to hold promise of significant change in the quality of the performance of teachers. A broad cluster of mutually reinforcing conditions explains the current condition of teaching and

the quality of classroom practices. These interrelated factors require a comprehensive solution. Piecemeal policies that attempt to mend this or that part of the problem simply but unfortunately will not help much. Effective policy solutions must be comprehensive and they must address the multiple aspects of the problem in multiple and reinforcing ways.

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